

Buddhists and Buddhist legacies in Modern Bengal¹

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Abstract

In the ancient period Bengal used to be a seat of Buddhism. The archaeological ruins and the accounts of the foreign travellers bear testimony to the expansion and richness of this heritage in ancient Bengal. Yet it was not before long that the religion degenerated and became almost extinct. There was hardly any trace of Buddhist practices and heritage in the medieval period when Bengal was ruled by Muslim rulers. There has been a revival and resurgence of Buddhism in modern period almost all over India and it has found its reflection in Bengal as well.

The Buddhists of Bengal are few in number yet the Buddhism they practice is not uniform and represent both the Hinayana and Mahayana schools of thought. Northern Buddhism as it had developed in Tibet is followed by the Tibeto Mongoloid population of Darjeeling, the northern district of Bengal . Even though Bengal had connections with Tibet in the ancient period, the Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism that the people of this region practice was introduced from Tibet itself in the early modern period through certain particular groups of people who migrated either from Tibet or the other two Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan and Sikkim. In contrast, the Bengalis who practice this religion in the plains of Bengal are almost universally Baruas who claim to be the original descendants of the ancient Buddhists of India.

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Existence of these different schools are the legacy of the different phases of history of the region and that of the religion itself. The variations in rituals and practices add to the cultural diversity of the state and highlight the different shades in the practice of the religion itself.

'Buddhism' survives in Bengal in another form. Buddha's philosophy has stirred and inspired the psyche of the Bengali intellectuals irrespective of the religion they actually professed. Even this has been possible due to some historical developments in the colonial period. Interest in 'Buddhism' has unleashed a plethora of literature on life and message of Buddha. Foremost among those writers was Rabindranath Tagore.

There may not be many practicing Buddhists in modern Bengal but there is a deep rooted respect for "Buddhism" in Bengali psyche- not for any particular sect or school of the religion but for what Buddhadeva had originally preached and proved with his life.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Bengal, Chattagram, Baruas, Mahayana, Theravad, Bengali intelligentsia, Rabindranath,*

Introduction

In the ancient period Bengal used to be a seat of Buddhism. The archaeological ruins and the accounts of the foreign travellers bear testimony to the expansion and richness of this heritage in ancient Bengal. Even though there is no definite evidence as to the time when Buddhism first gained influence in Bengal, there is no doubt that Bengal had developed a connection with Buddhism from a very early period. On the basis of the Sanskrit *Vinaya* texts, it can be assumed that Buddhism had probably obtained a footing in North Bengal even before the reign of King Asoka.

Archaeological evidence even suggests the existence of Buddhism in North Bengal as early as 2nd century B.C. Paucity of archaeological evidence from Bengal proper makes it difficult to say anything on the conditions of Buddhism in Bengal during the early centuries of the Christian era but the flourishing state of the religion at the beginning of the Gupta period presupposes that the religion had been prospering in different cities of Bengal during the earlier period as well. Description about the state of the religion and the religious institutions like the monasteries can be obtained from several contemporary texts, archaeological remains and from the accounts of the foreign travellers - particularly the Chinese. Fa Hien, in 5th century A.D. had mentioned *stupas* and residence of monks in different parts of the state of Bengal. Tamralipti alone is said to have contained 22 monasteries. His account is corroborated by writings of Ta – ceng – teng, Tao- lin, I tsing, Sheng – chi and of course Hiuen tsang. The latter had also described the different schools of Buddhism that flourished in Bengal at that time. There were some very big Buddhist universities in the region and a close connection had developed with Tibet which was visited by several eminent scholars from Bengal and adjoining regions .

One reason of the prosperity of Buddhism in Bengal was the patronage that it received from the rulers of Bengal. The Pala kings, although patrons of Brahminism, had promoted the cause of Buddhism in Bengal and in Bihar. Many minor dynasties of Bengal of this period were also followers of Buddhism.

The religion had changed its nature in course of time. The ancient schools of *sarvastivada* and *sammatiya* gradually lost their existence and the Mahayana school developed forms of mysticism like Tantrayana, Vajrayana and Kalachakrayana. On account of the great emphasis on esoteric aspects of the religion, Buddhism was soon unhinged. As time passed on, less and less importance was attached to the ceremonial aspects and it was not long before what remained of Buddhism was

absorbed in Brahmanical and *tantric* systems of Bengal and finally it was completely assimilated with *saktism*.

The *Pravrajya* and the consequent observances of the rules of monastic discipline lost relevance as monasticism was dead and the formal aspects of the religion were completely discarded. The process began before the end of the Pala period and was completed before the 14th century. Finally, after the Muslim invasion, Buddhism went out of Bengal leaving almost no trace of the religion in this part of India. It is believed that in order to save their lives many escaped to neighbouring countries of Arakan, Pegu, Nepal and even Tibet. Thus, even though Buddhism flourished in Bengal for a very long period and enjoyed the royal patronage, its history is also the history of loss of its basic characters and finally assimilation with Brahmanism which, in other words indicated the gradual degeneration of the ideals preached by Buddha himself.

Excepting a very few cases, we find almost no reference to Buddha in the medieval Bengali literature from the 14th to the 18th centuries. Of course one exception is the *Charyapada* (c. 10th century) which were composed by the *Vajrayani* Buddhists on some mystical thoughts and ideas. Of the local gods, Dharma *Thakur*, worshipped till today in parts of Bengal, is sometimes believed to be *Buddha Niranjana* by some scholars but that has not been acceptable to all.

There has been a resurgence of 'Buddhism' in Bengal from the late 19th century onwards. The religion as practiced today in Bengal, represents both the two sects of Mahayana and Theravada practised in the northern and the remaining parts of Bengal respectively. Even though the actual number of people who profess the religion has never been considerable in Bengal, Buddhist principles came to be held in high esteem by the non Buddhist Bengali intelligentsia in general. All these aspects will be discussed in the following sections.

The Buddhists of Bengal today

The number of Buddhists in modern Bengal (West Bengal in this case) is not great. As per an estimate it has been only 81,665 in 1951, 12,1504 in 1971 and 203,578 in 1991. There are two distinctly separate groups among these Buddhists – people from the plains and from the hills. The religion as practiced by them is also different – belonging to both the Theravada and the Mahayana or more specifically, the Tibetan Buddhism. The Chittagong district of erstwhile East Bengal (modern Bangladesh) is inhabited by several groups of people of tribal origin who are traditionally Buddhist by religion.

The single major group of Buddhists in the plains of Bengal are the Baruas of Bengal. Practitioners of the Theravada school of Buddhism, they are said to be the survivors of the original Buddhists of the ancient Buddhist period itself and are believed to be practicing the religion from the very old days. Not much research has been done on these Barua Buddhists and the literature on them is scanty. All the Barua Buddhists of West Bengal today are basically from the Chittagong district of Bangladesh or erstwhile East Bengal. Oral evidence has it that originally they belonged to the present Bihar state and other parts of Northern India and some of their ancestors had migrated to Chittagong during the period of Brahminist resurgence in India undertaking a long and arduous journey through Assam. There are different theories regarding the chronology of the migration. Some think that in the 6th century A.D. with the rise of Brahminism, Buddhism declined and Baruas from India then came to Chittagong. Others believe that in the 12th century when Bakhtiyar uddin Khilji conquered Magadha, a prince from Vriji community with his 700 relatives came to Chittagong and they are the ancestors of the Baruas. Since there is neither any archaeological nor any epigraphical evidence in support of these

theories these are nor beyond question. Another theory has it that the Baruas are the descendants of the Buddhist kings who are said to have ruled Bengal from 6th to the 13th centuries. These Bengali speaking Buddhists , are generally believed to have maintained an unbroken lineage from the original Buddhists of India.

The Chakmas, Tanchangyas, Chaks, Marmgs (Moghs), and Mrues are the other Buddhist communities of Chittagong . A few Rakhain Buddhists are also found in the district of Patuakhali. All these communities have distinctive Mongoloid characteristics in their looks, and they also have their own language, literature and script. While the Baruas claim to be the inheritors of the North Indian tradition of ancient Buddhism, these other Buddhist communities of tribal origin , now living in the Chittagong part of Bangladesh do not make any such claim. Rather they highlight their Arakanese connection from where they are believed to have immigrated. Thus, in view of the many contradictory accounts of the origin of these Buddhists of Bangladesh it is difficult to arrive at a final theory regarding their historical origin.

According to the Arakanese history, *Dengyawadi Aradafunf* it is learnt that the Chakmas had their own independent state in upper Burma and Arakan where they reigned for 500 years and it was in 1418 that following a severe repressive policy of the king of Arakan, they finally migrated to Chittagong. The Marmas or the Maghs are also from Arakan.

Even though all these groups of people professed Buddhism as their religion, by the 18th century the religion on the whole had greatly degenerated and could at best be said to have maintained a precarious existence. They had incorporated many Hindu practices like worship of different deities and even some sacrifices to God. Monks were almost ignorant about the practices of Vinaya. The first reform to the religion was initiated by Chakma queen Rani Kalindi(or Kanindri) who invited Ven.

Saramedha Mahasthavira to her Rajanagar monastery in 1857. This proved to be a turning point in the religious history of the Buddhists of Chittagong . Shocked to see the degenerated condition of the Buddhists of the region, he took upon himself the task of reforming the religion in accordance with Dhamma, Vinaya and Tripitak. It is said that the queen conferred the title Sangha Raja on him and in 1869 built a bhikku Sima at Sakyamuni monastery at her capital Rajanagar. .

The Theravada based religious reformation inspired the monks and people of the region. Eventually they discarded their Tantric practices and other superstitions and reverted to Theravada monastic disciplines. This was a kind of revival of the religion itself.

There is another section of Bengali speaking Buddhists who belong to Mahasthabir Nikaya which is a Bengali order of Buddhist monks. Even though they are not doctrinally opposed to Sangharaja Nikaya and in fact have some identical practices in many respects, they are opposed to the idea that Bengali Buddhists should come under influence of a foreign personality. It is out of this prejudice that they advocate different day to day practices for their monks in order to maintain an organizational front.

I9th century proved to be a turning point in the history of the religion in other parts of India as well. Changes leading to resurgence came from different quarters one significant development being the foundation of the *Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha* in 1892 by Venerable Kripasankar Mahasthabir for the regeneration of the religion in India . He was a contemporary of Anagarika Dharmapala , the founder of the Mahabodhi Society of India. Both worked for the same cause of reforming and reviving the religion in Bengal. Among the Bengali Buddhists there were some who were attracted towards Buddhism as a result of the missionary activities of these two.

On the whole however it can be concluded that even though the Bengali Buddhists are maintaining their religious identity they are quite similar to the Hindus and observe some Hindu practices as well and do not always maintain the puritan Buddhist traits established through the reform movement.

In contrast to these Buddhists from the plains, there are the followers of Mahayana Buddhism, basically among the people of the Himalayan borderland of Darjeeling. These Buddhists are the Lepchas and the Bhutias , the Sherpas and the Tamangs and of course the Tibetans, all of whom are people of Mongoloid origin. The religion they follow is the Tibetan type of Buddhism commonly known as Mahayana or Northern Buddhism.. Numerous monasteries and the *lamas* (monks) belonging to all the major sects of Tibetan Buddhism indicate the influence of Tibet in this part of Bengal.

The reason of the existence of these people in this part of Bengal is the history of close contact between this region and Tibet.

Historically, the district of Darjeeling used to be a part of the kingdom of Sikkim that became a part of Bengal only in 1835 when the king of Sikkim made a gift of this region to the British in Bengal. The present day subdivision of Kalimpong came to be attached to Darjeeling in 1866.This place too was originally a part of Sikkim which had been occupied by Bhutan in 1770. After Bhutan returned it to the British in 1865 the latter joined it to Darjeeling. Although both of these regions were basically uninhabited at the time of annexation, the people, however small they might have been in terms of number, shared the same Buddhist culture that prevailed in the two states of Sikkim and Bhutan.

The state of Sikkim was traditionally ruled by the Bhutia monarchy. Originally migrants from Sikkim, these people were Buddhist by religion and once they were able to set up their government in Sikkim, in 1642 they embarked upon a policy of

spreading their religion through converting the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the land and also through construction of monasteries. The influence of the religion was profound on the government and politics of Sikkim. So the religion had already taken its root among the people of this region when Darjeeling was handed over to the British and the tradition continued in Darjeeling.

These Bhutias who are people of Tibetan origin are not homogenous in nature. L.S.S.O' Malley in his Darjeeling District Gazetteer used the term to denote four groups of people.

1. The Sikkimese Bhutias – a mixed race of Tibetans and Lepchas . Basically they are the descendants of Tibetans who had settled in Sikkim a few centuries ago.
2. Sherpa Bhutias who had come from the east of Nepal.
- 3.Drukpa or Dharma Bhutias whose home was originally in Bhutan
4. The Tibetan Bhutias from Tibet.

In addition, the large number of Tibetan refugees who have settled down in Kalimpong and Darjeeling are also Buddhists. There are some Buddhists among the Nepalis as well. The Tamangs, the Sherpas and the Yolmos are Buddhists while Newars can be either Hindus or Buddhists. Tamangs claim to be the largest single group to practice Buddhism. However their religion is not a pure form of Buddhism and some Hindu elements have been mixed with it. This is true in case of the Lepchas also. They , in spite of their conversion into Buddhism are said to have retained some of their original animist traditions and rituals. As per the census data, the total number of Buddhist population in Darjeeling district in 1981 was 12,0,846 which was 11.85% of the total population of the district and in 1991 their population was 15,5,295 which was 11.05 %of the total population.

All these Buddhist communities maintain their monasteries in the region and observe similar rituals and rites. Some of the monasteries of this region had direct contact with Tibetan monasteries and some were even affiliated to some particular monastery of Sikkim or even Bhutan. . A few were in fact founded by Tibetan monks who often visited this part of Bengal through the mountain passes of Jelep-la and Nathu-la.

Many more monasteries have been set up in recent years by the refugee Tibetan *lamas* . Unable to practice their religion in their own country these lamas now have the urge to preserve their heritage in these newly founded centres and to pass on the tradition to the next generation. Darjeeling has become one of the centres of diasporic Tibetan Buddhist population. Monasteries are established in Siliguri town also. The number of *lamas* or Tibetan monks are considerable in this region. They provide the Buddhists of their particular sects with spiritual support and perform the rituals.

Practices of the Tibetan Buddhist communities of this region, are different from the Buddhists of the rest of Bengal . They add to the ethnic diversity and multiculturalism of the state and highlight the shades in the religion itself.

Revival of interest in Buddhism in Bengal

Even though the number of practicing Buddhists is not high in Bengal , Buddhism has exerted a very deep influence on the Bengali intelligentsia from the late 19th century onwards. Buddha's message of sacrifice, love of humanity, ideal of *ahimsa* and non violence, his *karuna* and *maitri* made an immediate appeal to the enlightened Bengalis irrespective of caste, creed and sex.

The Christian missionaries of Serampore initiated the earliest researches on Pali language and literature and thereby drew attention to the life and works of Lord

Buddha. In 1808 Felix Carey, Son of William Carey went to Rangoon for spreading Christianity and came in contact with Pali language and literature. He even authored a book on the language and translated some of the *suttas* (religious hymns composed in meter) into English.

Interest in the life of Buddha and Buddhism actually revived in late 19th century after the foundation of the *Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha* in 1892 by Venerable Kripasankar Mahasthabir for the regeneration of the religion in India. As mentioned earlier, he was a contemporary of Anagarika Dharmapala, the founder of the Mahabodhi Society of India.

Thanks to Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala, the late 19th century saw the resurgence of Buddhism not only in Bengal but in other parts of India as well. It all started with the publication of a number of articles by Sir Edwin Arnold (author of the famous book *The Light of Asia*) in the London based periodical the *Telegraph* drawing attention to the neglected state of the temple of Bodhgaya and its surroundings. These articles caught the interest of Ven Dharmapala who was deeply moved by these. He came from an aristocratic family of Ceylon but became *anagarika* (homeless) and dedicated his life to the restoration of the temple at Bodh Gaya as well as the *Dhamma* itself in the land of its birth.

After a visit to India in 1891 he founded the Maha Bodhi Society in Colombo in the same year. The initial task of the Society was the maintenance of a staff of *Bhikkus* in Bodh Gaya representing the Buddhist countries of Asia and publication of Buddhist literature in English. It also held an International Buddhist Conference in Bodh Gaya in 1891. In course of the next few years he visited America to spread the philosophy of Buddha and also opened branches of the society in Madras, Kushinagara and Anuradhapura. In 1915 the Society became a registered body with Asutosh Mukherjee as its first president and within next five years the Dhrmarajika

Caitya was built in Calcutta. In recognition of the position it had won, the Society was presented in 1920 with a casket containing the relics of the bones of Buddha which were to be enshrined in the *vihara*. These relics had been discovered by Archaeological explorations in 1891 and were preserved in the Madras Museum. Around the same period, Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha came into existence in 1892.

Impact of Buddhism on modern Bengali intelligentsia

It was from the last few years of the 19th century that inspired by some archaeological discoveries and by writings of some Orientalists, Bengali intellectuals became interested in Buddha's life and his message. . Sir Edwin Arnold's his book *The Light of Asia* in 1879 also made a profound impression in this country . Devendranath Thakur, father of Rabindranath, was the first Indian to take interest in Pali literature and Buddhism. He made a sojourn to Ceylone in September 1859 and joined in prayers and worships of the Buddhist monks. Back in home, he founded a religious institution called Brahma Vidyalaya in which can be identified some traces of Buddhist ideas and practices. Bankim Chandra Chattapadhyaya made an assessment of Buddha and compared him with Jesus Christ and Rousseau as early as in 1873

Kesavchandra Sen who accompanied Devendranath in Ceylone, was a zealous Brahmo but he too was so influenced by Buddhism that he started celebrating the birthday of Lord Buddha . He even made a visit to Bodhgaya and initiated an annual programme for religious discussions called Shakya Samagam in 1880. Devendranath's two sons, Dwijendranath and Satyendranath wrote books on Buddhist history and philosophy. This was the period when several books were being written on Buddhism and history of Buddhism by Bengali scholars. These included the researches made by Indologist Rajendralal Mitra, Haraprasad Sastri, Satischandra

Vidyabhusan and Romeschandra Dutt. Haraprasad was a great Orientalist. Besides writing papers on Buddha and Buddhist texts, he made landmark contribution to Bengali literature by discovering the Charyapada-the Buddhist mystic songs. Well known dramatists and poets Girishchandra Ghosh and Nabin Chandra Sen adopted Buddha's life as subject matter of their creations.

Of all the Bengali literati it was Rabindranath who wrote most extensively about Buddha. He wrote not only about the life events of Buddha but made an original interpretation of his philosophy as well. As early as 1883 he had written in his book *Samalochana* “*I am a devotee of Buddha....Whenever I go for pilgrimage where Buddha's tooth is preserved or where I look at the rock where Buddha's footstep is carved , I feel how I gain him in my own self*”. In 1903 he described Buddhadeva as follows –

Buddhadeva made man great. He discarded all caste divisions and relieved man from the compulsion of observing various rites and yagnas. He removed gods from being the object. He declared the power of Self. He refused to beg mercy and welfare of man from heaven and invoked it from within man's own self.

His writings on Buddha and related themes began in the last decade of the 19th century and continued almost till the last year of his life. Rabindranath did not of course go on with professional scholarship of Buddhist scriptures but the specific characteristics of Hinayani and Mahayani ideals were clear to him . In his essay ‘Bauddhadhrme Bhaktibad’ (1911) he made his own observation. He was for the Mahayana ideal of universal love. He emphasized that truth and love were identical. He compared Buddhas teachings to the Upanishadas.

For him, the truth as declared by the Upanishad is same as the Buddha's concept of love for the animals. *Maitri* is the special term used for love and Buddha is the embodiment of *karuna* and *maitri*. Rabindranath did not find any dissimilarity

between the teachings of the Buddha and those of the Upanishads. In the essay ‘Brahmavihara’ he explains *mangala* to be the goal of life, and he equates this *mangala* with *nirvana*. He differs from the Theravadi conception of *sunyata*. *Nirvana* for him cannot be eternal nothing. The object of life cannot be negative. It must be something positive and that has to be love or *maîtri*. This interpretation of Buddhism was certainly original. It is generally accepted that for Buddha, attraction to this world only creates *Tanha* – endless sorrow. One has to be free from this attraction. But Rabindranath resolves it this way –

‘People at that time used to believe that to attain the supreme state by practicing austerity is the ultimate goal. But when Buddhadeva attained Buddhahood he immediately set himself to work. That was pure action, because it was free from fear, greed, jealousy and dotage. It was beyond any selfish interest. It was action purely of love and mercy.’

Rabindranath did not accept that the total extinction of self is the *Nirvana*. On the other hand, to do good to mankind is the urge that must remain.

Rabindranath’s writings on Buddha are of three types – poems, dramas and addresses. He also composed dance dramas on Buddha theme. In the early years of his career he composed a number of poems and dramas the first literary composition on this theme being *Malini* (1896). It is based on the *Mahavastu- avadana* and gives a glimpse of conflict between the Brahmanas and the Buddhists. The same *avadana* provided him the central theme of the poem *Parishodh* ((1899) which was later in 1939 developed into the dance drama *Shyama*. The other poems based on the stories of different *Avadanás* are *Sreshtha Bhiksha*, *Nagarlakshmi*, *Abhisar*, *Samanya Kshati*, *Mulyaprapti*, *Pujarini* and *Mastakkibikray*. The stories of some of his dramas were also taken from Buddha’s life and message. These include *Raja* (1910), *Achalayatan* (1912), *Natir Puja* (1926). All the basic stories were taken

from Rajendralal Mitra's book -. *The Sanskrit Buddhist literature of Nepal* (1882) which is a descriptive account of various *avadana* stories and was used by Rabindranath as a constant companion.

In the later part of his life Rabindranath travelled to Siam, Java, Bali and Ceylon where Buddhism was still a living faith. Standing before the ancient relics he remembered the ancient glory and greatness of Buddha . Even in the last year of his life, when he was in Kalimpong, the local Buddhist residents came to pay homage to him on his birthday. Rabindranath was moved and composed poem in which he remembered Buddhadev. Buddha was, in fact the symbol of the philosophy of his own life.

That Buddha's ideals had a profound influence on Rabindranath's outlook is also reflected in the fact that the concept of *sangha* was very much in his mind when he founded his *Brahmacharyashrama* in Santiniketan. Even though it was modeled on the *Tapovana* style where students gathered at the feet of their teachers , at the same time they were taught to love a life in a body of united cooperation as in a *sangha*.

In his essay *Vishva Vidyalayer Rup*(1932) he explained how he loved to think that Visva Bharati would develop in the line of great Buddhist seats of learning like Nalanda, Bikramtsila and Taksasila.

Several renowned scholars like Sylva Levi, Bidhusekhar Sastri, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, Sujit Kumara Mukhopadhyaya, and the like joined Visva Bharati on his invitation.. The Cheena Bhavana turned out to be a widely known centre of Buddhist studies and later, the Department of Tibetan studies was also founded to pursue higher studies in Buddhist history and philosophy.

Tagore's deep regard for Buddha moved his young contemporaries like Satyendranath Datta as well. His poem *Buddha Purnima* or On the sight of the full moon on Buddha's birthday is well known. The trend continued. Younger poet

Mohitlal Majumdar interpreted his philosophy in a new light in his Poem *Mahamanaba* or the Great Man . Some of the compositions of other modern Bengali poets like Jibananda Das, Sudhindranath Datta, Birendra Chattapadhyya and Amiya Chakravorty are also based on themes from the life and philosophy of Buddha. As for modern Bengali prose , events from Buddha's life have been the theme of many a Bengali short stories and even novels. As early as 1883 , Haraprasad Sastri had written the novel *Kanchanmala* which was followed by *Benermeye* – published in 1919. A historian of eminence, Haraprasad Sastri had an impartial attitude and even though the themes of these two novels were from the history of Buddhism, he did not hesitate to show the shortcomings of Buddhist organizations and practices. Another novel -was written by the distinguished archaeologist Rakhaldas Bandapadhyaya which was serialized in the periodical *Manasi* during 1912 to 1914. Saradindu Bandapadhyaya was another popular Bengali writer who based many of his short stories and novels on themes related to Buddhism. Famous among his novels are *Kaler Mandira* (1951), *Gourmallar* (1954), *Tumi sandhyar megh* (1958), in addition to several short stories. Very recently, Bani Basu in her novel *Maitreya Jataka*, narrated the achievements of Buddha in a modern frame of mind.

Conclusion

History of Buddhism in Bengal has passed through various phases. In the ancient period Bengal used to be a seat of Buddhism. The archaeological ruins and the accounts of the foreign travellers bear testimony to the expansion and richness of this heritage in ancient Bengal. Yet it was not before long that the religion degenerated and became almost extinct. There was hardly any trace of Buddhist practices and heritage in the medieval period when Bengal was ruled by the Muslim rulers. There

has been a revival and resurgence of Buddhism in modern period almost all over India and it has found its reflection in Bengal as well.

Buddhism continues as a practicing religion among small , diverse groups of people in Bengal. On one hand the presence of the Mahayana Buddhists in the hills of Darjeeling region reminds one of the interaction between the Bengalis and the trans-border communities in the north and on the other hand, the tribal Buddhist communities in Chattagram region of Bangladesh bear the legacy of Bengal's connection with the kingdoms of Myanmar and Aracan at one point of time. Some communities even claim to carry the legacy of the religion from the heartland of India. The presence of these different groups of people practicing different forms of the same religion reminds one of the different phases of the history of Bengal as well as the different shades of the religion itself.

More important than that is the fact that Buddha's philosophy has stirred and inspired the Bengali intellectuals since the nineteenth century. Even Vivekananda, the Hindu Sannyasi, was highly respectful of the teachings of Lord Buddha and there are many references to Buddha in his writings. All the educated Bengalis in general are aware of Buddha's life and teachings. There is a deep rooted respect for "Buddhism"- not for any particular sect or school but for those concepts that he Buddha had originally preached and proved with his life. This has been possible for several reasons. The archaeological discoveries of the 18th and 19th centuries and foundation of the institutes like Mahabodhi Society created the interest in Buddhism and the Bengalis loved the pieces that the literati produced on the themes of Buddha's life and work. Researches carried on from the Asiatic Society of Bengal too had contributed to the creation of an awareness about Buddhism in general and the new archaeological discoveries that brought the history of Buddhism to light. Rabindranath on the other hand not only perpetuated this respect through his writings

but has enlightened them with his own insights into and interpretation of the religion itself.

This respect for Buddha and his preaching is one characteristic of resurgent Bengal.

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